

A proactive approach to couples counseling with adolescents

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Abstract:

Dating and relationships are common among adolescents as they begin to form the foundations upon which they will build future relationships. Although many adolescents seem to follow a pattern of dating and going steady, these relationships do not necessarily follow along an unproblematic course (McDonald & McKinney, 1994). For example, recent research has indicated a rise in dating violence among teens (Cochran, 1994; Kyle, 1991; Sculli, 1992). Not surprisingly, a survey of adolescents found that dating was ranked as one of several major worries that they face (Kaufman, Brown, Graves, Henderson, & Revolinski, 1993).

Article:

Dating is a normal developmental process for most adolescents as they begin their search for identity, the formation of which is influenced by their efforts and experiences in developing a variety of types of relationships with their peers. Frequently, adults fail to take these early efforts seriously, as if the value of teenage relationships should be determined solely on adult criteria of longevity and deep emotional involvement. However, in these formative relationships, adolescents not only learn more about themselves in ways that contribute to identity formation, but they also learn how to interact in intimate relationships with their peers. This critical time during adolescence can provide pivotal experiences that help adolescents define how they will interact, positively or negatively, within future dating relationships and intimate partnerships. Early intervention in adolescent dating relationships--particularly those that are most beset with problems--can go a long way toward changing potentially harmful interpersonal behavior patterns.

In a recent study, Guerrero and Afifi (1995) confirmed that many adolescents have difficulty discussing such issues with parents. This reluctance to discuss dating issues with parents may provide secondary school counselors with a unique opportunity to provide assistance to teenagers as they learn to negotiate more intimate relationships with boyfriends and girlfriends. Although no formal empirical study has been conducted to date on the efficacy of couples counseling with adolescents, we propose that secondary school counselors draw upon the research of couples counseling with adult populations and take a more proactive approach when dealing with this unique population.

In the past few years, increasing attention has been paid to the role of school counselors in providing family counseling services in the schools (Hinkle & Wells, 1995). Couples counseling for adolescents may be a logical extension of this expanded role for counselors working in the schools. Those who advocate for family counseling in the schools view school counselors as being in an ideal position to offer counseling to families and their children who might not otherwise have access to or seek out counseling (Hinkle & Wells, 1995). Similarly, school counselors can be invaluable resources in offering guidance and support to adolescents who are experimenting with developing and maintaining relationships with their peers, particularly those who are involved in the exciting, stressful, and confusing world of dating.

In this article, we present a rationale for couples counseling with adolescents, discuss developmental perspectives on adolescence, and conclude with a case study and implications for secondary school counseling.

Role of Relationships in Adolescent Development

According to Erikson (1950), the primary developmental challenge during adolescence is establishing a sense of personal identity. Developing this identity requires individuals to assess their strengths and weaknesses and decide how they want to deal with them. The search for an individual identity includes developing a meaningful self-concept in which past, present, and future are integrated to form a unified whole. Only through sustained individual effort can identity be achieved. Failure to actively work on one's identity formation can result in alienation and a sense of isolation and confusion. Selman (1971; 1976; 1977; 1980), in describing the development of social perspective taking during adolescence, emphasized the role of social interaction with peers in helping adolescents develop an expanded understanding and awareness of both self and other. As Sprinthall and Collins (1988) noted, "without appropriate experience and reflection [emphasis added] in social interaction, the child will not automatically proceed from one stage [of social cognitive development] to the next" (p. 122).

Only fairly recently has the importance of intimate relationships been acknowledged as a key factor in identity development for adolescents. Although in Erikson's (1950) developmental model the Identity vs. Identity Diffusion stage precedes Intimacy vs. Isolation, this developmental sequence has been challenged in recent years by a number of theorists, including Gilligan (1982) and Chickering and Reisser (1993). For example, in the most recent revision of Chickering's (1969) original vector, Chickering and Reisser (1993) placed the vector (developmental task) of developing more intimate personal relationships (Vector 4: Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships) ahead of Establishing Identity (Vector 5) in recognition of the important role of relationships for many adolescents in establishing their sense of individual identity. Gilligan, in challenging Kohlberg's (1971) theory of moral development, proposed a developmental model in which care and relationships were emphasized in moral decision making over objective principles of justice and universal fairness. Even Erikson noted the importance of relationships in this stage, writing that adolescents determine the answer to the question "Who am I?" by evaluating the social feedback they receive from their peers.

Case Study

"Kim," a 14-year-old, high school freshman, female, came to visit the first author in the school counseling suite a few days following a series of group discussions with students on relationships and peer pressure. Feeling a little uncomfortable at first about discussing her current relationship with her 16-year-old, high school sophomore boyfriend, Kim soon relaxed and began to discuss her boyfriend's pattern of verbal abuse towards her. Kim and "Dave" had been dating, or "going steady," for about 6 months. Although it was clear that Dave's abuse was not in any way physical nor perceived by Kim as a threat of physical abuse, his verbal abuse of her had escalated over the course of the relationship. Whenever Kim suggested that they attempt to discuss things more rationally, Dave would "get mad and walk away." The more Kim pressed for discussions, the more angry Dave would become, often resulting in the two not speaking for several days.

Kim explained that she cared deeply about Dave and that most of the time he was "really nice." She explained that she wanted to learn better ways of talking with Dave without getting him mad. Several of Kim's friends suggested that she break up with Dave, but Kim felt that they really did not know him and she was committed to "working things out."

As a school counselor and adult, it would have been easy to echo the sentiments of Kim's friends and advise her to end the relationship. Moreover, in a traditional school counselor role, the counselor might have limited counseling interventions to working only on an individual basis with Kim and/or Dave. The primary concern that emerged from this initial session was Dave and his pattern of verbal abuse towards Kim. If there were no intervention at this point, then, when would it come? Would Dave's behavior be continued in future relationships or escalate into possible physical abuse? For Kim, how could she learn to identify abusive behaviors, develop skills for dealing with these behaviors, and develop a clear sense of herself as someone who would not allow herself to be victimized by such abuse? Early intervention is one key to any successful school counseling program (American School Counselor Association, 1990; Baker, 1996; Schmidt, 1991).

Furthermore, since Kim came to the school counselor seeking ways to continue her relationship with Dave, it was important to respect her goals and help her to accomplish them by working together.

The school counselor suggested to Kim that it might be helpful to work with her and Dave together. However, Kim and the counselor agreed that the counselor should first speak with Dave alone to explore his receptiveness to this idea. Kim was returned to her class, and Dave was asked to come to the school counselor's office. When Dave arrived, the first part of the session was spent building rapport and helping him feel at ease in that setting. The school counselor informed him that Kim cared for him a great deal and that she had come to the counselor seeking help in making things better for him and for them as a couple. After exploring some of his verbal abuse behaviors, Dave eagerly agreed to work on the relationship with Kim. Several weekly meetings were scheduled for couples counseling, staggering the meeting dates so that Kim and Dave did not miss the same class each time.

A solution-focused approach to couples counseling was used as the foundation of the counselor's approach to working with Kim and Dave. The efficacy of the solution-focused approach has been well documented (de Shazer, 1985; Kiser, Piercy, & Lipchik, 1993; O'Hanlon, 1988; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989), especially within the school setting (Bonnington, 1993; Downing & Harrison, 1992; Murphy, 1994). As O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis stated, solution-focused therapy is a brief strategy that: "Offers a new way to think about and approach therapy. It is a method that focuses on people's competence rather than their deficits, their strengths rather than their weaknesses, their possibilities rather than their limitations" (p. 1). For an excellent example of using a solution-focused approach with adult couples, including goal setting and questioning strategies, the authors strongly recommend the Kiser et al. (1993) article.

Kim and Dave met with the school counselor once a week for about 2 months. During this time, it was learned that Dave's verbal abuse towards Kim may have stemmed from a pattern he observed at home between his father and mother. Not knowing a better way to communicate his frustrations within his relationship with Kim, Dave simply modeled the behavior of his father toward his mother. The school counselor offered some alternative ways of communicating and interacting that facilitated better communication between Kim and Dave. He also met separately with Dave to discuss some other communication strategies outside his relationship with Kim. By the end of the school year, Kim and Dave had showed marked improvement in their ability to communicate with one another through their hard work in couples counseling.

Although a change in school assignments prevented following up with this adolescent couple after treatment discontinued, Kim and Dave both gained immediate benefit from time-limited couples counseling. Perhaps more importantly, they had acquired communication skills and new knowledge about relationships that they could take with them and apply in future relationships. In addition, through couples counseling as well as individual counseling, the school counselor was able to intervene with Dave around his developing pattern of verbal abuse in relationships and help him establish healthier patterns for communicating with significant others. By taking Kim and Dave's relationship seriously and treating them with respect, the school counselor was able to gain their trust, engage them in the process of couples counseling, and help them learn and apply basic communication and relationship skills.

Implications for School Counseling

Although secondary school counselors have many duties and responsibilities competing for their time and energy, they also have many extraordinary opportunities to affect, and intervene in, the lives of adolescents with whom they work. Most educators recognize that in any kind of learning, there are points in time when students are particularly open to learning different kinds of information. Adolescents who present individually or jointly with relationship issues may be uniquely open to receiving help in managing the challenges of both intimate relationships and friendships. Because these relationships are so important in the development of adolescents (even when the relationships themselves may be short-lived), they may be highly motivated to work on relationships and to learn and utilize new skills and approaches that have the potential for making things better. Motivation for change is a critical factor affecting the success of any counseling experience. Adolescents may

have a particularly high level of motivation for working on relationship issues because they are viewed as being so important during this time in their lives. An approachable and available school counselor may be one of the few adults to whom an adolescent can turn for help in their dating relationships.

What is most important is not the particular approach used, but rather that the school counselor be willing to view and treat a young couple's relationship seriously, as at least a training ground for future relationships. It also is important to recognize that many adolescents maintain long-term relationships, sometimes much longer than many older adults who decide upon marriage after a short time together. These initial dating and romantic relationships among adolescents are the foundations for behavior in future relationships. We have observed that the issues these adolescents present to us in school counseling experiences are the same ones we have faced when counseling older adult couples. By intervening at this age, school counselors have a powerful opportunity to shape relationship behaviors early. Adults, especially school counselors, must take these adolescent relationships seriously, not only because they are serious to our younger generation but also because they are the fundamental experiences that affect relationships throughout our lives.

As a profession, counseling often defines itself in terms of prevention, providing our clients with skills, knowledge, and support to prepare them to deal with issues that they are likely to face. Providing time-limited couples counseling for adolescents in the schools can help prepare them to be more successful in their current and future relationships. Moreover, couples counseling offers school counselors an effective way to intervene in an area of their students' lives that often is of critical importance in helping them negotiate the challenges of adolescence.

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